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ABSTRACT

Lecturing is essentially a form of public communication. Hence public speaking literature can be used to learn more about how to improve lecturing skills. The following objectives can help the lecturer be effective: (1) exercising/gaining control of the class; (2) highlighting major ideas; (3) setting the stage for forthcoming activities; (4) showing one's own interest and enthusiasm for the subject; and (5) providing a role model of good public communication skills. As with any teaching method, there can be pitfalls. The lecturer can try to cover too much material; fail to prepare adequately; be perceived as disorganized or unclear; inadvertently encourage student passivity; ignore student feedback; fail to formulate good examples; and display distracting or poor delivery. There are, however, several ways for people to improve as lecturers, such as acknowledging/dealing with speech anxiety; anticipating the teaching environment; planning carefully for each lecture; combining lecturing with other teaching techniques; organizing the lecture according to sound principles of speech construction; using visual aids when appropriate; delivering the lecture extemporaneously; demonstrating respect for student reactions; and seeking feedback on teaching. (MS)

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Improving Lecturing Skills: Some Insights From Speech Communication

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Most college teachers lecture. Even those who embrace a modern view of participatory learning still turn to the lecture from time to time. As a teaching method, the lecture has been used for hundreds of years. Certainly, today, no student can acquire an advanced degree without listening to dozens of professors lecture.

As perhaps with other teaching methods, the lecture gets a mixed review. Although most of us have been inspired by brilliant lecturers, all of us have been bored, confused, and anesthetized by poor lecturers. We have vivid memories of the psychology teacher who read from his scripted notes without once looking up for an entire semester, the geography instructor who spoke to her maps, and the mathematics teacher who spoke so softly and obliquely that he could neither be heard nor understood. It is little wonder that we sometimes worry about our own lecturing practices, hoping that we will escape the traps that other well-intended teachers have fallen into.

Lecturing is essentially a form of public communication. We can borrow, then, from the public speaking literature to learn more about how to improve our lecturing skills. The ability to lecture well, like speaking well, is an acquired skill. However, unlike public speakers, as lecturers we have multiple opportunities to communicate with the same "audience." Thus, we can assess our mistakes, think analytically about our actions, and take steps to improve while teaching the same group of students. We may lecture as many as forty or more times to the same class. Improvement, then, is possible within the same semester as well as over several semesters or years.

WHY SHOULD WE LECTURE?

As with any teaching method, the choice to lecture should be a strategic one. Lecturing is not the only way to teach, but it can be very effective if it is used with appropriate goals in mind. What are some objectives we might hope to achieve by lecturing? Among them are: (1) exercising/gaining control of the class, (2) highlighting major ideas, (3) setting the stage for forthcoming activities, (4) showing one's own interest and enthusiasm for the subject, (5) providing a role model of good public communication skills. Some brief elaboration may clarify.

Exercising/Gaining Control of the Class

Communication research clearly reveals that those who talk the most (in terms of frequency and duration) exert the most control over the rhetorical environment. The classroom is no exception. The teacher who chooses to lecture is asking students to listen. She is also setting the agenda, choosing the pacing and emphasis, and deciding the order in which concepts will be introduced. In addition, she sets the "rules" for interaction. Will she allow interrupting questions during the lecture? Will she save time after the lecture to address student concerns? The lecture, then, serves as a method of control over interaction patterns, organization, and substance.

Highlighting Major Ideas

Students are exposed to large quantities of information over the course of a semester. Sometimes, they find it difficult to distinguish major themes, ideas, or concepts from those of less importance. They may also find some of the material they encounter to be difficult or confusing. Through a lecture, the instructor can emphasize those concepts that are really valuable, help students put their knowledge in perspective, and through example and explanation, clarify confusions. Although the number of major points stressed will vary with the length of the class and the sophistication of the student, generally students can absorb about three to five major ideas during a typical classroom lecture, with seven as an absolute maximum. Ideally, these major ideas should be broadly conceptual, presenting stimulating perspectives or idea scaffolds, upon which students can "hang" facts and attach their own insights and experiences.

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Setting the Stage for Forthcoming Activities

In nearly every class, we ask students to perform many tasks. We may ask them to read a novel intelligently, prepare a persuasive speech, solve a set of math problems, observe a dramatic presentation, or pass a difficult examination. In some instances, we use these tasks to assess their knowledge and achievement. In other cases, we view the task as an opportunity for students to learn. Whatever our purposes, we want our students to understand the nature and purpose of the assigned task, to have a clear sense of our expectations, and to be well equipped to successfully grapple with the material. One method of preparing students for their out-of-class learning is to set the stage with a lecture. If students were to watch a videotape of Mario Cuomo's speech to the 1984 Democratic convention, for instance, the instructor might lecture about the rhetorical environment in which the speech was delivered, highlighting Cuomo's background, his relationship to other candidates, and his likely role in the future of the Democratic Party. After listening to this kind of lecture, students should be reasonably well prepared to understand and learn from the speech.

Showing Your Own Interest/ Enthusiasm for the Subject

It is probably safe to say that students do not always come to our classes with a high level of intrinsic interest in the subject. If the class is required (e.g., finite math, microeconomics, public speaking, freshman composition, accounting), students may view it as little more than a potential impediment to their career or professional school goals, as something to be endured, or overcome. This attitude stands in sharp contrast to our own.

As teachers, we have devoted our intellectual lives to exploring our disciplines as subjects of great interest and intrinsic worth. When we lecture, through the *way* we speak, we have the opportunity to show our students how we feel about the subject. If we speak with enthusiasm and energy, our students may eventually grow to better appreciate, and even enjoy, the subject. As Emerson once wrote, "the lecturer aims not to drill but to ... set the hearts of youth aflame." However dramatic Emerson's statement, most of us can think of teachers with whom we studied who, through their love and enthusiasm, so influenced us that we were inspired to pursue our present disciplines. Like them, we, too, can teach with inspiration and conviction.

Providing a Public Speaking Role Model

Nearly every critique of higher education in America published during the past five years has bemoaned students' lack of oral and written communication skills. Every college graduate should be able to communicate effectively, to speak articulately and in an organized manner, to show a concern for clarity and conciseness, and to be able to support her views with evidence and sound reasoning. One way of attempting to improve students' oral communication skills is to ask every student to take a course in public speaking. Another way is to expose students on a daily basis to good communication role models. The more we demonstrate through our lectures the sorts of qualities alluded to above, the more likely we are to have a positive impact on the way our students communicate. If we cannot establish eye contact with our students, if we ramble in a disorganized fashion, if we are unable to support our assertions with evidence, we will be hard pressed to expect better things of our students.

PITFALLS ASSOCIATED WITH LECTURING

To acknowledge that good lecturing can allow us to accomplish many goals is important. But, lecturing is no panacea. The poor lecturers I referred to earlier are only too common. And even good lecturers can make many mistakes. Some particular problem areas involve: (1) trying to cover too much material, (2) failing to prepare adequately, (3) being perceived as disorganized or unclear, (4) inadvertently encouraging student passivity, (5) ignoring student feedback, (6) failing to formulate good examples, and (7) displaying distracting or poor delivery. Let me enumerate briefly.

Trying to Cover Too Much Material

It is simply impossible to say everything that ought to be said during the course of a single semester. This is true, no matter the specificity of the subject. Many lecturers, however, cannot accept that truth, except in the most general sense. They set forth, then, to be as complete and comprehensive as possible in each of their lectures. Soon, they fall behind. Or, they go too fast. Students complain that they don't understand, that they can't keep up with the notes. Eventually, everyone is frustrated, and all because the instructor felt compelled to "cover the book."

Failing to Prepare

Most instructors have devoted many years of their lives to learning, thinking about, and doing research related to the subjects they teach. Thus, they are very well informed indeed. But, being an expert on a subject does not insure that one can teach it to others effectively. Each of us can think of professors we have known who had great minds but who were miserable teachers. Knowledge is the foundation of effective lecturing, but, other preparatory steps are essential.

Being Perceived as Disorganized or Unclear

The notion of "perception" here is very important. Even if a lecture is logically organized from the instructor's point of view, if students fail to perceive its organization or clarity, they soon will feel lost and frustrated. Research has shown that listeners tend to perceive speakers as disorganized if (a) they cannot identify the main ideas, (b) no summaries are used (including previews, internal summaries, and final summaries), (c) transitions are weak or nonexistent, and (d) the organizational pattern is

too complex to follow. Not only are disorganized speakers perceived as less credible, but listeners have great difficulty learning from presentations they perceive as poorly organized.

Inadvertently Encouraging Student Passivity

Most students who attend a lecture assume that their role is passive. Especially in very large classes, they may think that it is perfectly acceptable to sit back, relax, and take a few notes. Because they do not expect to be called upon to speak, they assume that they will not be actively involved in learning. The instructor, of course, probably has different ideas. He may plan to engage students in brief discussion at selected points during the lecture. He certainly expects that students will remain actively engaged intellectually. He must recognize, however, that his expectations and the attitudes of his students are likely to be in conflict.

Ignoring Student Feedback

Much of this problem is related to the "cover the book" syndrome, combined with a measure of rigidity. The instructor who believes that she *must* cover 14 key points during a given lecture is not likely to welcome student questions or requests to slow down. In fact, she may prefer to focus on her lecture notes and to ignore more subtle cues that students are having problems. Much student feedback expressing boredom, confusion, or frustration is communicated nonverbally. Thus, unless the teacher is attentive to such cues and actively responds to them, she will lose students as she lectures.

Failing to Formulate Good Examples

In any communication situation, examples are needed to clarify, to bring ideas to life, and to make the general specific. As a public speaking instructor, I may discuss basic types of evidence to be used in speeches and tests for determining the quality of evidence. But, it is only when I show students concrete examples of evidence that they begin to understand precisely. Colorful examples are memorable. Some research suggests that listeners use their memory of examples to reconstruct key ideas. Thus, not only can compelling examples make one's lecture clearer and more vivid, they can also assist students in recalling important ideas. Unfortunately, it takes time and effort to find or formulate good examples. Many instructors fail to do so, hoping instead that examples will come to them spontaneously as they lecture. Often, this is not the case.

Distracting or Poor Delivery

Whenever any speaker's delivery or presentation style calls attention to itself, it serves as a source of distraction. Students who are counting the number of times their instructor says "you know" are not learning very much about the content being addressed. The list of poor delivery qualities is quite extensive. It includes (but is by no means limited to) speaking in a monotone, looking or sounding bored, using vocalized pauses, talking too rapidly, hiding behind the podium, reading lecture notes, failing to use reinforcing gestures, and playing with objects (such as glasses, pencils, or jewelry). Most instructors will never have flawless delivery, but whenever their delivery becomes the source of student boredom, distraction, or ridicule, a problem must be acknowledged.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE AS LECTURERS?

As a form of oral communication, lecturing is an acquired skill. While some instructors seems to have an innate flare for lecturing, any instructor can improve significantly as a lecturer if he is willing to exert the time and effort required. Some particular improvement measures involve: (1) acknowledging dealing with speech anxiety, (2) anticipating the teaching environment, (3) planning carefully for each lecture, (4) combining lecturing with other teaching techniques, (5) organizing the lecture according to sound principles of speech construction, (6) using visual aids when appropriate, (7) delivering the lecture extemporaneously, (8) demonstrating respect for student reactions, and (9) seeking feedback on teaching from multiple sources. Elaboration follows.

Acknowledging Speech Anxiety

Extensive research on communication apprehension has shown that the vast majority of public communicators experience some anxiety before (and often while) making a presentation. Speech anxiety is frequently accompanied by an array of physiological reactions, including cold, clammy hands, dry mouth, "butterflies" in the stomach, and rapid heartbeat. These dread symptoms are usually brought on by increases in adrenalin associated with the speaker's fears about the speech. Some speakers become anxious because they feel like they are being evaluated when they speak. Others feel inadequately prepared. Still others only get nervous in certain kinds of speaking situations. For instance, the teacher might never be nervous while speaking to advanced students in a seminar, but may become quite nervous when asked to address a group of 300 undergraduates.

To deal effectively with speech anxiety it is important to recognize that being anxious is a normal reaction to speaking in public. Moreover, research has shown that communication apprehension tends to diminish over time. New teachers are more likely to be nervous than experienced teachers. And each of us is likely to feel less relaxed during our first few class meetings than later in the semester. Most important, experiencing speech anxiety in no way suggests that we will be ineffective as speakers or teachers. Some of the greatest public speakers of the past wrote and spoke of their speaking fears. Whenever we keep company with such orators as Cicero, William Jennings Bryan, and Abraham Lincoln, we should grow to believe that, indeed, it is possible to be excellent, even if we are apprehensive. In fact, some experts argue that we can be more effective as speakers if

we experience some speech-associated anxiety. That is, because of the adrenalin associated with communication apprehension, we actually acquire some extra energy. That energy can be used to fashion a more enthusiastic, dynamic presentation. Viewed in this way, speech anxiety becomes a potential resource rather than a threat to teaching or speaking effectiveness.

Of course, no one wants to be paralyzed by stage fright. Whenever we feel our stomachs churning and our hearts racing, we need to remind ourselves of some of the facts discussed above. For some speakers, deep, diaphragmatic breathing, isometric exercises, and cognitive restructuring (psychologically reframing the speaking/teaching situation in a positive way) prove useful. And every speaker/teacher can benefit from the next two improvement suggestions discussed below.

Anticipating the Teaching Environment

One of the most off-putting things any teacher can encounter is being surprised (in an unpleasant sense) by some physical aspect of the classroom. Classrooms without adequate blackboard space, missing podiums or overhead projectors, chairs bolted to the floor—all can prove disastrous, depending upon one's teaching style and class requirements. Thus, it is simply essential to visit the classroom in advance to see whether changes are needed, or to devise strategies for coping with realities that cannot be changed.

Another component of anticipating the teaching/learning environment is to think about one's students. Who are they? What are their backgrounds likely to consist of? How many are there? How many are freshmen? How many are taking the course as a requirement? Seeking responses to these sorts of questions can assist us in anticipating our students' likely attitudes, prior knowledge, listening habits, and ability/willingness to contribute to the classroom conversation. This sort of "audience analysis" is quite valuable.

Carefully Preparing for Each Lecture

Besides being well versed on the subject, every teacher must confront a variety of issues before each lecture. Are hand-outs needed? Should transparencies be prepared? How might the subject be presented most effectively? What can be assumed about the students' ability to comprehend this particular subject? How can their interest and involvement be sought? What are the most critical ideas to be covered? How can the time be used most effectively? What sorts of questions are students likely to raise? What sorts of examples might bring the subject to life and aid student understanding? The more one grapples with these kinds of questions before each class meeting, the greater the likelihood of conducting a good class.

Combining Lecturing with Other Teaching Strategies

Many instructors make the mistake of assuming that they must make a choice between lecturing and doing something else, like leading a discussion. This simply is not true. In fact, most of us will find that our lectures are better received if we lecture for briefer periods of time, using other activities and class discussion for variety and to encourage student involvement. Research has shown that typical student attention spans are limited to about 15-20 minutes. It makes sense, then, to lecture for about that long and then to ask students to talk, either among themselves, or with you as you lead them in class discussion.

Instructors who have had little experience leading student discussions should be prepared for some resistance at first. In a class they initially perceive as a lecture class, students will not expect to be called upon to speak. It is important, then, to use the lecture/discussion technique early in the semester and to continue to use it consistently over time. When asking questions, open questions (Why? What contributed to? Give me some examples of . . . What is your opinion of?) are usually most effective. Pausing after asking a question is crucial. Research has shown that if an instructor asks a question and then counts to 10 (slowly and silently), he is very likely to elicit some student response. One study showed that the number of student responses increased by 80% when instructors used this technique.

Organizing the Lecture Effectively

Every lecture should follow basic principles of good speech construction. The lecture should have *an introduction* which gains the attention and interest of the class and orients them to the subject of the day, *a body* in which a few major ideas are highlighted and arranged in some logical order for presentation, and *a conclusion* which pulls the main ideas together and leaves the students with something to think about. Instructors should recall that transitions are important, as are previews and summaries. Any good public speaking textbook will suggest many specific patterns of organization and several examples of each. Sometimes organization can be emphasized by visually showing students the outline of the lecture.

Using Visual Aids

Most lectures can benefit from the use of some visual aids. Visual aids come in many forms, including objects, charts, graphs, and pictures. Most public speaking teachers use audio-visual aids regularly, showing their classes tapes of master speakers and videotaping and showing students their own speeches for analysis and discussion. Nearly any instructor will occasionally use the blackboard, handouts, or the overhead projector to outline the main points of the lecture. Since about 15% of all students are "visually oriented," learning more easily with some form of visual reinforcement, it behooves us to think of ways to use visual aids to accompany our lectures.

Delivering the Lecture Extemporaneously

Extemporaneous delivery is a presentational style which relies on a carefully prepared outline, but allows for directness and spontaneity. The teacher who delivers his lectures extemporaneously need not worry about reading a manuscript. He is more likely to have good eye contact and to be able to adapt to student reactions. The extemporaneous style also encourages movement and gestures since the instructor need not stand behind a podium, and can usually carry note cards as he or she moves about.

One problem sometimes associated with extemporaneous delivery is a lack of fluency. Because the teacher is not reading from a manuscript, she may occasionally search for words or even lose track of the next point. Carefully going over one's notes, either visually or orally, planning specific examples in advance, and occasionally reading direct quotes will help improve fluency. It is especially important to guard against excessive vocalized pauses and other intermittent fillers, such as "you know," and "okay." Through the effective use of extemporaneous delivery, teachers can communicate their interest and enthusiasm while staying in touch with student reactions.

Demonstrating Respect for Student Opinion

In part, by watching student feedback and responding to it, the instructor shows that she is concerned about how students are getting along in the course. Simply choosing not to lecture for the entire class period also shows concern for student thought. Other ways to show respect include: encouraging students to ask questions whenever they are confused, actively seeking their reactions to views presented in the lecture, actively listening to their comments, acknowledging the worth of their contributions, and asking for their feedback on the class early enough in the semester so that changes can be made.

Seeking Feedback on Our Teaching

Students are valuable sources of information about teaching effectiveness. They may not be experts in the field, but they can judge whether or not we are clear in our explanations, organize our remarks in ways that seem logical to them, and deliver our comments with a sense of interest and enthusiasm. It is important to ask students what they think, but it is equally valuable to seek feedback on our teaching from our colleagues and from other teaching experts. Peers can react to our treatment of the subject, and teaching consultants can suggest practical ways to improve our teaching and lecturing skills. One of the best ways to improve oral communication skills is to practice speaking, to receive good critical feedback, to devise strategies for improvement, and to try again.

Where To Go From Here . . .

For further information on the ideas presented, and on the references cited in this newsletter, contact the University Office for Learning Resources, Bryan Hall 215G, in Bloomington 855-9475.

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